Animal Studies Journal

Volume 5 | Number 1 Article 11

6-2016

[Review] Ann C. Colley, Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014

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Abstract
You should never judge a book by its cover but, of course, that's exactly what the Victorians did when they looked at animals—or so Professor Ann Colley claims, and with some justification. This book is a contribution to the growing list of valuable and entertaining studies of the collection and exhibition of wild animals in Victorian Britain and beyond, and it is highly recommended to anyone researching the field. I was looking forward to reading this as although there has been a fair bit of work on zoos and menageries and, especially recently, on taxidermy, the habit of collecting skins is less well documented. But it was on skins that the Victorian naturalists often depended for their knowledge of new animals. For example, one of the chief requirements that the great ornithologist John Gould had of his field collectors was that they have a good knowledge and high ability in the techniques for skinning and preserving specimens, for only that way could organic remains make the long journey from desert or jungle back to England in the days before climate control. It is thanks to these skinners that we have records of otherwise extinct birds although, of course, it is also, in some cases, thanks to them, that the birds became extinct.

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I was expecting something which concentrated solely on the topic of skins, but in fact, Professor Colley ranges much more widely, and that is both a strength and a weakness of a book considered solely as a monograph about skins.

There is a seven-page theoretical section in which various extremely predictable contemporary ideas about skin are reviewed together with some rather more interesting commentary on Victorian attitudes to skin. Whether this section helps the reader I doubt. The book doesn't operate via an especially visible theoretical framework and, if it did, it would need a far more extensive exposition than this. I suppose that many people do feel the need to offer some form

of theoretical account and academic publishers (who are not necessarily the audience for the books they publish) often demand it, but such accounts are rarely interesting or helpful and, in this case, I don't think the book is either improved or diminished.

There is then an extremely interesting chapter on Manchester's Belle Vue Zoo. This fascinating facility is still relatively under-researched and Professor Colley exposes some very interesting material. I did wonder, though, how relevant this zoo was to the focus on skin, and found the analysis of the zoo via this topic to be somewhat forced. This comes down to opinion. I simply don't agree with Professor Colley that Victorians did look at skin when they looked at animals – they obviously did *physically* look at the skin, but, to use a distinction from John Berger, is that what they saw? I don't see much evidence that they did but that doesn't mean I'm right and Professor Colley is wrong. In any case, the chapter on Belle Vue is an interesting and valuable contribution to zoo scholarship – it simply isn't well contextualized by the topic of skin. This is perhaps best exemplified by the analysis of two *Punch* cartoons (one by Linley Sambourne - not Sanbourne or Sanborne as he is variously referred to in the book). It may well be the case that what they are driven by is an anxiety about skin or human-animal boundaries, but it is equally possible to analyze them in very different ways and spend more time on similarity of form or other arguments about the social role of science and nature.

The chapters that follow focus on skin and skin collection using much more direct examples. These chapters contain the strongest sections and do most to open up the field. It is here that people who are already familiar with animal studies will find most things that are new to them. Professor Colley looks at the great collections of Lord Derby and at various exhibitions. She looks at George Catlin's account of the strange incident of ladies who touched the native Americans exhibited by in Manchester – it is inevitable that ethnographic shows get mixed up with zoological exhibitions in discussion of animals in this period– but doesn't speak about the even odder exhibition in Frank Fillis's *Savage South Africa* show a few years later where a genuine moral panic broke out over the proximity of white women to near naked African men. The counter-intuitive point is that the balance of the argument at that time concerned the possibility that the women might corrupt the natives. In these chapters there is also a very valuable analysis of Edward Lear's work as one of Lord Derby's illustrators but less convincing (in the context of a book about skins not in itself) discussion of the role of fur in paintings by

Whistler and Alma-Tadema. Here we also find a nicely argued section on the desire to touch animals and the difficulties early zoos faced in protecting their charges and their customers from each other.

The final expository chapter looks at maps and mapping and here I felt that the arguments became very forced. There is an interesting and valuable core here about Victorian maps which showed animal distribution or used animals for other illustrative purposes. Given the relationship between wild animal collecting and the Imperial project (not a simple one as Professor Colley wisely and correctly points out – perhaps against the grain of consensus), this is a worthwhile topic and we are introduced to some fascinating material. But there is also material on G. M. Hopkins, maps and skins which might have been worthwhile in illustrating an occasional point but here takes on a life of its own and is very tangential (in my opinion at least) to the main theme of the book – or what should or could be its main theme.

Although this review is not as positive as I would have liked, I would remind readers that it starts with a strong recommendation. Many, if not most, books in this still-expanding field can be digressive and often reveal the originating discipline of the scholar responsible. So some books – like this one – will tend to have more on cultural and literary analysis while others will be more historiographical. But animal studies is, thankfully, a broad church to which all are welcome, and while I would, in this case, have preferred a book which looked in greater depth at the physical processes of skin collection and the collections themselves, I still learned a lot from Professor Colley and I am sure that other animal scholars will too.